Reflexions on Acting

Introduction by
HENRY IRVING

Reflexions on the Actor's Art

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PAPERS ON ACTING

IV

Reflexions on the Actor's Art

BY

TALMA

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

SIR HENRY IRVING

AND A REVIEW BY

H. C. FLEEMING JENKIN

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CONTENTS

Introduction by Sir Henry Irving 1

Reflexions on the Actor's Art by Talma 5

Review by H. C. Fleeming Jenkin 45

Notes by B. M. 59

INTRODUCTION

FEW things can be said about the stage at any time, which will not excite controversy; but I think one of the few is, that the influence of the drama today is wider than it ever was. There is a vast increase of playgoers; the intellectual interest in the stage is steadily growing; and there is a general conviction that the actor is placed in a position of trust which he cannot worthily fill without a strong sense of responsibility. Dramatic artists, as a rule, speak for themselves. Their work is constantly before the public, and it is judged on its merits. None the less is there a want of a permanent embodiment of the principles of our art; a kind of *vade mecum* of the actor's calling, written by one of themselves, and by an artist universally recognized as a competent expositor. Such a work, in my opinion, is Talma's essay on the actor's art, the following translation of which was originally published in the *Theater* of 1877 at my suggestion.

No one can read Talma's subtle yet sim-

ple description of the qualities and the course of study essential to the actor, without a conviction that acting is one of the most fascinating of the arts. To the actor the whole field of human nature is open. Whether in the ideal world of the stage or in the actual world of social intercourse, his mind is continually accumulating impressions which become a part of his artistic being. This experience is common to the students of other arts, but the actor has this advantage, that all he learns is embodied in his own personality, not translated thru some medium, like the painter's canvas or the novelist's page. At the same time, this purely personal art is subjected to the most severe tests. It is easier to detect a flaw in an actor's impersonation than an improbability in a book. The man enacts the character before many —a false intonation jars immediately upon the ear, an unnatural look or gesture is promptly convicted by the eye. The co-operation of sensibility and intelligence of which Talma speaks, has thus to be conducted under the most exacting conditions. There must be no suggestion of effort. The essence of acting is its apparent spontaneity. Per-

fect illusion is attained when every effect seems to be an accident. If the declamation is too measured, the sense of truth is at once impaired; if, on the other hand, it falls only the shadow of a shade below the level of appropriate expression, the auditor's sympathy is instantly checkt. "The union of grandeur without pomp, and nature without triviality," is of all artistic ideals the most difficult to attain; and with this goal before him no actor can feel that his art is a plaything.

The end of all acting is "to hold the mirror up to Nature." Different actors have different methods, but that is their common purpose which can be accomplisht only by the closest study and observation. Acting, like every other art, has a mechanism. No painter, however great his imaginative power, can succeed in pure ignorance of the technicalities of his art; and no actor can make much progress till he has mastered a certain mechanism which is within the scope of patient intelligence. Beyond that, is the sphere in which a magnetic personality exercises a power of sympathy which is irresistible and indefinable. That is great acting;

but tho it is inborn, and cannot be taught, it can be brought forth only when the actor is master of the methods of his craft.

I am conscious that no words of mine can add any weight to the lessons which are set forth with such earnestness and brilliance in Talma's pages; but I venture to emphasize them by two golden rules. Let the student remember, first, that every sentence expresses a new thought, and therefore frequently demands a change of intonation; secondly, that the thought precedes the word. "The actor should have the art of thinking before he speaks." Of course there are passages in which thought and language are borne along by the stream of emotion, and completely intermingled. But more often it will be found that the most natural, the most seemingly accidental effects are obtained when the working of the mind is visible before the tongue gives it words.

HENRY IRVING.

(March, 1883.)

Reflexions on the Actor's Art

Reflexions on the Actor's Art

I HAVE no pretension to be an author; all my studies have been directed towards my calling, the object of which is to afford at once pleasure and instruction. Tragedy and Comedy, the one by the portraiture of virtue and crime, the other by the exposure of vice or folly, interest us, or make us laugh, while they correct and instruct. Associated with great authors, actors are to them more than translators. A translator adds nothing to the ideas of the author he translates. The actor, putting himself faithfully in the place of the personage he represents, should perfect the idea of the author of whom he is the interpreter. One of the greatest misfortunes of our art is, that it dies, as it were, with us, while all other artists leave behind them monuments of their works. The talent of the actor, when he has quitted the stage, exists no longer, except in the recollection of those who have seen and heard him. This

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Talma See Science of Plays. P.

consideration should impart additional weight to the writings, the reflexions, and the lessons which great actors have left; and these writings may become still more useful if they are commented upon and discust by actors who obtain celebrity in our day. Doubtless it is this motive which has induced the editors of the 'Mémoires Dramatiques' to request me to add to the notice of Lekain some reflexions on his talent and on the art which he illustrated.

Lekain had no master. Every actor ought to be his own tutor. If he has not in himself the necessary faculties for expressing the passions, and painting characters, all the lessons in the world cannot give them to him. Genius is not acquired. This faculty of creating is born with us; but if the actor possesses it, the counsel of persons of taste may then guide him; and as there is in the art of reciting verse a part in some degree mechanical, the lessons of an actor profoundly versed in his art may save him much study and time.

Lekain, from the commencement of his career, met with great success. His *début* lasted seventeen months. One day, after

he had performed at Court, Louis XV. said, "This man has made me weep,—I, who never weep!" This illustrious suffrage procured his admission to the Comédie-Française. Before appearing with it he had acquired some reputation at private theaters. It was in one of these that Voltaire first saw and noticed him, and there commenced his connection with that great man.

The system of declamation then in vogue was a sort of sing-song psalmody, which had existed from the very birth of the theater. Lekain,—subjected, in spite of himself, to the influence of example,—felt the necessity of breaking his shackles and the pedantic rules by which the theater was bound. He dared to utter for the first time on the stage the true accents of nature. Filled with a strong and profound sensibility, and a burning and communicative energy, his action, at first impassioned and irregular, pleased the young, who were enchanted by his ardor and the warmth of his delivery, and, above all, were moved by the accents of his profoundly tragic voice. The admirers of the ancient psalmody criticized him severely, nicknaming him "the bull." They did not

note this

find in him that pompous declamation, that chiming and measured declamation, in which a profound respect for the cesura and the rime made the verses always fall in regular cadence. His march, his movements, his attitudes, his action had not that liveliness, those graces of our fathers, which then constituted a fine actor, and which the Marcels of the age taught to their pupils in initiating them in the beauties of the minute. Lekain, a plain plebian, a workman in a goldsmith's shop, had not, it is true, been brought up on the laps of queens, as Baron said actors ought to be; but nature, a still more noble instructress, had undertaken the charge of revealing her secrets to him. In time he succeeded in overcoming the bad taste which his inexperience had at first naturally thrown into his acting. He learnt to master its vivacity and regulate its movements, yet at first he dared not entirely abandon the cadenced song which was then regarded as the ideal of the art of declamation, and which the actor preserved even in the burst of passion.

It was to this false taste that we must attribute the little progress which costume had

made in the time of Lekain. There is no doubt that he regarded fidelity in costume as a very important matter. We discover it in the efforts he made to render it less ridiculous than it was at that period. In fact, truth in the dresses, as in the decorations, contributes greatly to theatrical illusion, and transports the spectator to the age and the country in which the personages represented lived. This fidelity, too, furnishes the actor with the means of giving a peculiar physiognomy to each of his characters. But a reason still more cogent makes me consider as highly culpable the actors who neglect this part of their art. The theater ought to offer to youth in some measure a course of living history; and does not this negligence give him entirely false notions of the habits and manners of the personages whom the tragedy resuscitates? I remember well that in my early years, on reading history, my imagination always represented to itself the princes and the heroes whom I had seen at the theater. I figured to myself Bayard elegantly drest in a chamois-colored coat, without a beard, and powdered and frizzled like a *petit maitre* of the eighteenth century.

Caesar I pictured to myself highly buttoned up in a fine white satin coat, his long, flowing locks fastened with rosettes of ribbon. If in those days an actor occasionally approximated to the antique dress, the simplicity of it was lost in a profusion of ridiculous embroidery, and I fancied that silks and velvets were as common at Athens and Rome as at Paris and London. Statues, monuments, and ancient MSS. adorned with miniatures, existed then as well as now; but they were not consulted. It was the time of the Bouchers and the Van Loos, who took care not to follow the example of Raphael and Poussin in the arrangements of their draperies. It was only when David appeared that painters and sculptors, especially the younger of them, occupied themselves, under his inspiration, with these researches. Connected with most of them, and feeling the utility this study might have for the theater, I applied myself to it with no common zeal; in my own way I became a painter. I had many obstacles and prejudices to overcome, but success at last crowned my efforts, and without fearing an accusation of presumption I may say that my example has had a great influence over

all the theaters of Europe. Lekain could not have surmounted so many difficulties; the time had not come. Would he have dared to risk naked arms, the antique sandals, hair without powder, long draperies, and woolen stuffs? Such a toilet would have been regarded as very offensive, not to say indecent. Lekain did all that was possible; he advanced the first step, and what he dared to do emboldened us to do still more.

Actors ought at all times to take nature for a model, to make it the constant object of their studies. Lekain felt that the brilliant colors of poetry served only to give more grandeur and majesty to the beauties of nature. He was not ignorant that persons deeply affected by the stronger passions, or overwhelmed with great grief, or violently agitated by great political interests, have a more elevated and ideal language,—yet this language is still that of nature. It is, therefore, this nature—noble, animated, aggrandized, but at the same time simple—which ought to be the constant object of the studies of the actor, as well as of the poet. I have frequently heard persons of authority state that tragedy is not in nature, and this

idea has been repeated without reflexion until it has become a kind of maxim. The world, occupied with other objects, has not sufficiently studied all the workings of the passions. It judges too lightly, and indifferent authors and actors, who pay but little attention to their art, serve to accredit this error. But let us examine any of the impassioned or political characters of Corneille and Racine. How often their language is at once simple and elevated! How pathetic and natural is Voltaire when he is inspired by a passion! It is not the negligence and carelessness of a vulgar conversation that we find in the beautiful scenes of those great poets. It is the simple language, the aggrandized but exact expression, of nature itself. Let us examine from every point of view the exposition and *dénouement* of Rotrou's 'Venceslas,' the fifth act of 'Rodogune' and 'Cinna,' the part of Horatius, the scenes of Agamemnon and Achilles, the parts of Joad, Œdipe, the two Brutuses, César, the parts of Phèdre, Andromaque, Hermione, &c. I defy any person to give them a finer or more natural form of expression. Take away the rime, and all these personages would have

exprest themselves in the same manner as in real life. It is the same with some actors who have adorned the French stage, as Lekain, Mlle. Dumesnil, Molé and Monvel. It was only by a faithful imitation of truth and nature that they succeeded in creating those powerful emotions in an enlightened nation which still exist in the recollection of those who heard them. It must, however, be confest that, amongst the great actors of all countries, only a few have sought after this truth. Molière, and Shakspere before him, had given excellent lessons to their brethren, the one in his 'Impromptu de Versailles' and the other in 'Hamlet.' How comes it, then, that in spite of the advice of these two great masters, and no doubt, of that of many of their contemporaries, the false system of pompous declamation had been established in almost all the theaters of Europe, and proclaimed as the sole type of theatrical imitation? It is because truth in all art is what is most difficult to find and seize. The statue of Minerva exists in the block of marble, but the chisel of Phidias alone can discover it. This faculty has been given to very few

actors; and mediocrity, being in the majority, has laid down the law.

I may here be permitted to make an observation which has been suggested to me by the great event of the Revolution, for its violent crises, of which I was a witness, have often served me as a study. The man of the world and the man of the people, so opposite in their language, frequently express the great agitations of the mind in the same way. The one forgets his social manners, the other quits his vulgar fancies. The former descends to nature, the latter remounts to it. Each puts off the artificial man to become natural and true. The accent of each will be the same in the violence of the same passions or the same sorrows. Picture to yourself a mother intently looking on the empty cradle of a child she had just lost; a sort of stupidity in the features, a few tears flowing down her cheeks at distant intervals, piercing cries and convulsive sobs bursting forth from time to time,—these will represent the sorrow of a woman of the people the same as that of a duchess. Suppose, again, a man of the people and a man of the court to have both fallen into a violent fit of jealousy or ven-

geance; these two men, so different in their habits, will be the same in their frenzy; they will present in their fury the same expression; their looks, their features, their actions, their attitudes, their movements will assume all at once a terrible, grand, and solemn character, worthy in both of the pencil of the painter and the study of the actor. And, perhaps, even the delirium of passion may inspire the one as well as the other with one of those words,—one of those sublime expressions,—which the poet would conceive. The great movements of the soul elevate man to an ideal nature, in whatever rank fate may have placed him. The Revolution, which brought so many passions into play, has had popular orators who have astonisht all by sublime traits of untutored eloquence, and by an expression and accent which Lekain would not have been ashamed of.

Lekain felt that the art of declamation did not consist in reciting verse with more or less emphasis, but that this art might be made to impart a sort of reality to the fictions of the stage. To attain this end it is necessary that the actor should have received from nature an extreme sensibility and a profound intel-

ligence, and Lekain possest these qualifications in an eminent degree. Indeed, the strong impressions which actors create on the stage are the result only of the alliance of these two essential faculties. I must explain what I mean by this. To my mind, sensibility is not only that faculty which an actor possesses of being moved himself, and of affecting his being so far as to imprint on his features, and especially on his voice, that expression and those accents of sorrow which awake all the sympathies of the art and extort tears from auditors. I include in it the effect which it produces, the imagination of which it is the source,—not that imagination which consists in having reminiscences, so that the object seems actually present (this, properly speaking, is only memory) but that imagination which, creative, active and powerful, consists in collecting in one single fictitious object the qualities of several real objects, which associates the actor with the inspirations of the poet, transports him back to the past, and enable him to look on at the lives of historical personages or the impassioned figures created by genius,—which reveals to him, as tho by magic, their phys-

iognomy, their heroic stature, their language, their habits, all the shades of their character, all the movements of their soul, and even their singularities. I also call sensibility that faculty of exaltation which agitates an actor, takes possession of his senses, shakes even his very soul, and enables him to enter into the most tragic situations, and the most terrible of the passions, as if they were his own. The intelligence which accompanies sensibility judges the impressions which the latter has made us feel; it selects, arranges them, and subjects them to calculation. If sensibility furnishes the objects, the intelligence brings them into play. It aids us to direct the employment of our physical and intellectual forces,—to judge between the relations and connections which connect the poet and the situation or the character of the personages, and sometimes to add the shades that are wanting, or that language cannot express,—to complete, in fine, their expression by action and physiognomy.

It may be conceived that such a person must have received from nature a peculiar organization for sensibility, that common property of our being. Every one possesses

it in a greater or less degree. But in the man whom nature has destined to paint the passions in their greatest excesses, to give them all their violence, and show them in all their delirium, one may perceive that it must have a much greater energy; and, as all our emotions are intimately connected with our nerves, the nervous system in the actor must be so mobile and plastic as to be moved by the inspirations of the poet as easily as the Aeolian harp sounds with the least breath of air that touches it.

If the actor is not endowed with a sensibility at least equal to that of any of his audience he can move them but very little. It is only by an excess of sensibility that he can succeed in producing deep impressions, and move even the coldest souls. The power that raises must be greater than the power raised. This faculty ought ever to exist in the actor—I will not say greater or stronger than in the poet who conceived the movement of the soul reproduced on the stage—but more lively, more rapid, and more powerful. The poet or the painter can wait for the moment of inspiration to write or to paint. In the actor, on the contrary, it must

be commanded at any moment, at his will. That it may be sudden, lively, and prompt, he must possess an excess of sensibility. Nay, more, his intelligence must always be on the watch, and, acting in concert with his sensibility, regulate its movement and effects; for he cannot, like the painter and the poet, efface what he does.

Therefore, between two persons destined for the stage, one possessing the extreme sensibility I have defined, and the other a profound intelligence, I would without question prefer the former. He might fall into some errors, but his sensibility would inspire him with those sublime movements which seize upon the spectator and carry delight to the heart. The superior intelligence of the other would render him cold and regular. The one would go beyond your expectations and your ideas; the other would only accomplish them. Your mind would be deeply stirred by the inspired actor; your judgment alone would be satisfied by the intelligent actor. The inspired actor will so associate you with the emotions he feels that he will not leave you even the liberty of judgment; the other, by his prudent and irreproachable

acting, will leave your faculties at liberty to reason on the matter at your ease. The former will be the personage himself, the latter only an actor who represents that personage. Inspiration in the one will frequently supply the place of intelligence; in the other the combinations of intelligence will supply only feebly the absence of inspiration. To form a great actor, like Lekain, the union of sensibility and intelligence is required.

The actor who possesses this double gift adopts a course of study peculiar to himself. In the first place, by repeated exercises, he enters deeply into the emotions, and his speech acquires the accent proper to the situation of the personage he has to represent. This done, he goes to the theater not only to give theatrical effect to his studies, but also to yield himself to the spontaneous flashes of his sensibility and all the emotions which it involuntarily produces in him. What does he then do? In order that his inspirations may not be lost, his memory, in the silence of repose, recalls the accent of his voice, the expression of his features, his action,—in a word, the spontaneous workings of his mind, which he had suffered to have free course,

and, in effect, everything which in the moments of his exaltation contributed to the effect he had produced. His intelligence then passes all these means in review, connecting them and fixing them in his memory, to reemploy them at pleasure in succeeding representations. These impressions are often so evanescent that on retiring behind the scenes he must repeat to himself what he had been playing rather than what he had to play. By this kind of labor the intelligence accumulates and preserves all the creations of sensibility. It is by this means that at the end of twenty years (it requires at least this length of time) a person destined to display fine talent may at length present to the public a series of characters acted almost to perfection. Such was the course which Lekain constantly took, and which must be taken by every one who has the ambition to excel on the stage. The whole of his life was devoted to this kind of study, and it was only during the last five or six years of his life, between 1772 or 1773 and 1778, that he reaped his fruit: It was then that his fertile sensibility raised him to the tragic situations he had to paint, and his intelligence enabled

him to display all the treasures he had amassed. It was then that his acting was fixt on such bases, and was so subservient to his will, that the same combinations and the same effect presented themselves without study. Accent, inflexions, action, attitudes, looks, all were reproduced at every representation with the same exactness, the same vigor; and if there was any difference between one representation and another, it was always in favor of the last. Sensibility and intelligence, therefore, are the principal faculties necessary to an actor. Yet these alone will not suffice. Apart from memory, which is his indispensable instrument, and stature and features adapted to the character he has to play, he must have a voice that can be modulated with ease, and at the same time be powerful and expressive. I need scarcely add that a good education, the study of history—(not so much the events as the manners of the people, and the particular character of historical personages)—and even drawing, ought to add grace and strength to the gifts of nature.

It will be well understood that I here speak only of tragedy. Without entering

into the question whether it is more difficult to play tragedy or comedy, I will say that to arrive at perfection in either, the same moral and physical faculties are required, only I think the tragedian ought to possess more power and sensibility. The comedian does not require the same energy; the imagination in him has less scope. He represents beings whom he sees every day—beings of his own class. Indeed, with very few exceptions, his task is confined to the representations of folly and ridicule, and to painting passions in his own sphere of life, and, consequently, more moderate than those which come within the domain of tragedy. It is, if I may so express it, his own nature which, in his imitations, speaks and acts; whereas the tragic actor must quit the circle in which he is accustomed to live, and plunge into the regions where the genius of the poet has placed and clothed in ideal forms the beings conceived by him or furnisht by history. He must preserve these personages in their grand proportions, but at the same time he must subject their elevated language to natural accents and true expression; and it is this union of grandeur without pomp, and

nature without triviality—this union of the ideal and the true, which is so difficult to attain in tragedy. I shall, perhaps, be told that a tragic actor has a much greater liberty in the choice of his means of offering to the public objects whose types do not exist in society, while the same public can easily decide whether the comedian furnishes an exact copy of his model. I would reply that the passions are of all ages. Society may weaken their energy, but they do not the less exist in the soul, and every spectator is a competent judge from his own feelings. With regard to the great historical characters, the enlightened public can easily judge of the truth of the imitation. It will therefore appear from what I have laid down that the moral faculties ought to have more force and intensity in the tragic than in the comic actor.

As to the physical qualities, it is evident that the pliability of the features and the expression of the physiognomy ought to be stronger, the voice more full, more sonorous, and more profoundly articulate in the tragic actor, who stands in need of certain combinations and more than ordinary powers to per-

form from the beginning to the end with the same energy a part in which the author has frequently collected in a narrow compass, and in the space of two hours, all the movements, all the agitations, which an impassioned being can feel only in the course of a long life. I repeat, however, that not fewer qualities, tho of a different kind, are required in a great comedian than in a great tragic actor; each has need of being initiated into the mysteries of nature, the inclinations, the weaknesses, the extravagances of the human heart.

When we consider all the qualities necessary to form an excellent tragic actor, all the gifts which nature should have bestowed upon him, can we be surprised that they are so rare? Amongst the majority of those who go on the stage, one has penetration, but his soul is cold as ice. Another possesses sensibility, but intelligence is wanting. One possesses both these requisites, but in so slight a degree, that it is as if he did not possess them at all; his acting is characterized neither by energy, expression, nor confidence, and is without color; sometimes he speaks in a loud and sometimes in a low key,

quickly or slowly, as if by chance. Another has received from nature all these gifts, but his voice is harsh, dry and monotonous, and totally incapable of expressing the passions; he weeps without drawing tears from others; he is affected and his audience is unmoved. One has a sonorous and touching voice, but his features are disagreeable; his stature and form have nothing heroic in them. In short, the requisites for a really great actor are so many, and so seldom united in the same person, that we ought not to be surprised at finding them appear at such long intervals.

It must be confessed that Lekain had some faults; but in literature and in the arts of imitation genius is rated in proportion to the beauties it creates. Its imperfections form no part of its fame, and would be forgotten if they were not allied to noble aspirations. Nature had refused to Lekain some of the advantages which the stage demands. His features had nothing noble in them; his physiognomy was common, his figure short. But his exquisite sensibility, the movement of an ardent and impassioned soul, the faculty he possessed of plunging entirely into the situation of the personage he repre-

sented, the intelligence, so delicately fine, which enabled him to perceive and produce all the shades of the character he had to paint—these embellisht his irregular features and gave him an inexpressible charm. His voice was naturally heavy, and by no means flexible. It was to some extent what is called a veiled voice, but that very veil imparted to it, defective as it was in some respects, vibrations which went to the bottom of the hearer's soul. However, by dint of application, he contrived to overcome its stiffness, to enrich it with all the accents of passion, and to render it amenable to all the delicate inflexions of sentiment. He had, in fact, studied his voice as one studies an instrument. He knew all its qualities and all its defects. He passed lightly over the harsh to give fuller effect to the vibrations of the harmonious chords. His voice, on which he essayed every accent, became a rich-keyed instrument, from which he could draw forth at pleasure every sound he stood in need of. And such is the power of a voice thus formed by nature attuned by art, that it affects even the foreigner who does not understand the words. Frenchmen who are

totally unacquainted with English have been affected even to tears by the accents of the touching voice of Miss O'Neil.

At the commencement of his career, Lekain, like all young actors, gave way to boisterous cries and violent movement, believing that in this way he triumpht over difficulties. In time, however, he felt that of all monotonies that of the lungs was the most unsupportable; that tragedy must be spoken, not howled; that a continual explosion fatigues without appealing; and that only when it is rare and unexpected can it astonish and move. He felt, in fine, that the auditor, shockt by the ranting on the stage, forgets the personage represented, and pities or condemns the actor. Thus Lekain, often fatigued in long and arduous scenes, took care to conceal from the public the violence of his efforts, and at the very moment when his powers were nearly exhausted they seemed to possess all their strength and vigor.

Lekain has been reproacht for having been heavy in his recitation. This defect was natural. He was slow, calm, and reflecting. Besides, Voltaire, whose actor he peculiarly was, would not, perhaps, have read-

ily consented to sacrifice the pomp and harmony of his verse to a more natural tone. He wisht him to be energetic, and as he had deckt out tragedy a little the actor was obliged to follow in the track of the poet. Again, in the days of Lekain, a period so brilliant from the genius of its writers and philosophers, all the arts of imitation had fallen into a false and mannered taste, and Lekain, perhaps, thought himself sufficiently rich in all his gifts and attainments to make a slight concession to the bad taste of his days. Yet his style, at first slow and cadenced, by degrees became animated, and from the moment he gained the high region of passion he astonisht by his sublimity.

Notwithstanding the bad taste alluded to, there existed in society at that time, and among the friends of Voltaire, a great number of persons whose ideas in matters of art were more correct, and their advice was of great service to Lekain. Voltaire, also, tho he was a very indifferent actor, even when he played in his own pieces, possest a good theatrical knowledge of the stage; this he communicated to Lekain, who profited by it. During one of the actor's

visits to Ferney Voltaire made him totally change his manner of playing Genghis-Khan, in the 'Orphan of China.' On his return to Paris it was the first character he played. The audience, astonisht at the change, was for a long time undecided whether to praise or blame the performance. They could not but think that the actor was indisposed. There was nothing of the turbulance or the trickery which had previously procured him so much applause in the same part. It was only after the fall of the curtain that the audience felt that Lekain was right. Public opinion was formed instantaneously, and by an electrical movement it manifested itself in long and loud applause. "What's the matter?" asked Lekain of Rougeot, a servant of the theater. "It's applause, monsieur; they are at length of your way of thinking."

Experience had taught Lekain that all the silly combinations of mediocrity, the contrast of sounds, and ranting and raving might evoke great applause and many bravos; but it conferred no reputation. The lovers of noise and vociferation fancy their souls are wooed, while only their ears are

stunned. There is a certain number of artists, *connoisseurs,* and intelligent persons who are sensible only to what is true and conformable to nature. These persons do not like much noise, and it is upon their opinion that an actor's reputation depends. Lekain despised those plaudits which torment and often distract an actor. He resolved to study only that part of the public which was worth pleasing. He rejected all the charlatanism of his art, and produced a true effect; he always discarded the claptraps which so many others seek to discover. He was, consequently, one of the actors the least appreciated in his day, but he was the most admired by competent judges, and he rendered tragedy more familiar without depriving it of its majestic proportions.

He knew how to regulate all his movements and all his actions. He regarded this as a very essential part of his art. For action is language in another form. If it is violent or hurried, the carriage ceases to be noble. Thus, while other actors were theatrical kings only, in him the dignity did not appear to be the result of effort, but the simple effect of habit. He did not raise his

shoulders or swell his voice to give an order. He knew that men in power had no need of such efforts to make themselves obeyed, and that in the sphere they occupy all their words have weight and all their movements authority. Lekain displayed superior intelligence and great ability in the varied styles of his recitation, which was slow or rapid, as circumstances required; and his pauses were always full of deep significance. There are, in fact, certain circumstances in which it is necessary to solicit one's self before we confide to the tongue the emotions of the soul or the calculations of the mind. The actor, therefore, must have the art of thinking before he speaks, and by introducing pauses he appears to meditate upon what he is about to say. But his physiognomy must correspond also with the suspensions of his voice. His attitudes and features must indicate that during these moments of silence his soul is deeply engaged; without this his pauses will seem rather to be the result of defective memory than a secret of his art.

There are also situations in which a person strongly moved feels too acutely to wait

the slow combination of words. The sentiment that overpowers him escapes in mute action before the voice is able to give it utterance. The gesture, the attitude, and the look ought, then, to precede the words, as the flash of the lightning precedes the thunder. The display adds greatly to the expression, as it discovers a mind so profoundly imbued that, impatient to manifest itself, it has chosen the more rapid signs. These artifices contribute what is properly called by-play, a most essential part of the theatrical art, and most difficult to acquire, retain, and regulate well. It is by this means that the actor gives to his speech an air of truth, and takes from it all appearance of measured speaking.

There are also situations in which a person transported by the violence of feeling finds at once all the expression he wishes. The words come to his lips as rapidly as the thoughts to his mind; they are born with them, and succeed each other without interruption. The mind of the actor, then, ought to be hurried and rapid; he must even conceal from the audience the effort he makes to prolong his breath. This effort he must

make, since the slightest interruption or the slightest pause would destroy the illusion, because the mind would seem to participate in this pause. Besides, passion does not follow the rules of grammar; it pays but little respect to colons, and semi-colons, and full stops, which it displaces without any ceremony.

Lekain had a long illness a few years before his death, and it was to this illness that he owed the perfect development and refining of his talents. This may appear strange, but it is literally true. There are violent crises and certain disorders in the animal economy which often excite the nervous system and give the imagination an inconceivable impetus. The body suffers, but the mind is active. Persons stricken down by illness have astonisht us by the vivacity of their ideas; others remember things completely forgotten; others seem to pierce the veil which hangs between them and the future. Perhaps Chénier was not wrong in saying that "Heaven gives prophetic accents to the dying."

When the illness passes away something of the excess of sensibility always remains im-

printed on the nervous system; the emotions are more profound, and all our sensations acquire more delicacy. It would seem as if these shocks purified and renewed our being; and this was the effect which his illness had upon Lekain. The inaction to which he had been reduced became of service to him; his rest was that of labor. Genius does not always require exercise, and, like the gold mine, it forms and perfects itself in silence and repose.

He reappeared on the stage after a long absence. The audience, instead of having to show indulgence to a man enfeebled by suffering, saw him, as it were, ascend from the tomb with a more perfect intelligence, seemingly clothed with a purer, more perfect existence. It was then that he rejected what his intelligence disapproved. There were no more cries, no more efforts of the lungs, no more of those ordinary griefs, no more of those vulgar tears, which lessen and degrade the personage. His voice, at once pleasant and sonorous, had acquired new accents and vibrations which found responsive chords in every heart; his tears were heroic and penetrating, his acting—full, profound, pathetic,

and terrible—roused and moved even the most insensible of his hearers.

It was also at this latter period of his life, having acquired a greater knowledge of the passions, and having himself perhaps witnest deep anguish, he was the better able to paint it; and if he frequently, to express great sorrow, suffered his melancholy and dolorous voice to escape thru sobs and tears, often, too, in the highest degree of moral suffering, his voice changed; it became veiled and uttered only inarticulate sounds of woe. His eyes appeared dull with sorrow, and shed no tears, which seemed to be chased back on the heart. Admirable artifice! drawn from nature, and more calculated to move the soul than tears themselves; for in real life, while we pity those who weep, we feel, at least, that tears are a relief to them; but how much more is our pity excited at the sight of the unfortunate being whom the excess of deep despair deprives of voice to express his suffering, and of tears to relieve him.

Lekain was the creature of passion; he never loved but to madness; and, it is said, he hated in the same manner. He whose

soul is not susceptible to the extremes of passion will never rise to excellence as an actor. In the expression of the passions there are many shades which cannot be devined and which the actor cannot paint until he has felt them himself. The observations which he has made on his own nature serve at once for his study and example; he interrogates himself on the impressions his soul has felt, on the expression they imprinted upon his features, on the accents of his voice in the various states of feeling. He meditates on these, and clothes the fictitious passions with these real forms. I scarcely know how to confess that, in my own person, in any circumstance of my life in which I experienced deep sorrow, the passion of the theater was so strong in me that, altho opprest with real sorrow, and disregarding the tears I shed, I made, in spite of myself, a rapid and fugitive observation on the alteration of my voice, and on a certain spasmodic vibration which it contracted as I wept; and, I say it, not without some shame, I even thought of making use of this on the stage, and, indeed, this experiment on myself has often been of service to me.

The contrarieties, the sorrows, and melancholy reflexions which an actor may apply to the personage he represents, in exciting his sensibility, place him in the degree of agitation necessary for the development of his faculties. Lekain thus found, in his own passions, display for his talents. As to the odious characters and vile passions, of which the type was not in him—for no man was more honorable than Lekain — he painted them by analogy. In fact, amongst the irregular passions which disgrace humanity, there are some which possess points of contact with those which ennoble it. Thus, the sentiment of a lofty emulation enables us to divine what envy may feel; the just resentment of wrongs shows us in miniature the excess of hatred and vengeance. Reserve and prudence enable us to paint dissimulation. The desires, the torments, and the jealousies of love enable us to conceive all its frenzies and initiate us in the secret of its crimes.

These combinations, these comparisons, are the result of a rapid and imperceptible labor of sensibility, united with intelligence, which secretly operates on the actor as on

the poet, and which reveals to them what is foreign to their own nature—the viler passions of guilty and corrupted minds. Thus Milton, a man of austere probity, and so full of the divine power, created the personage of Satan. Corneille, the simplest and the worthiest of men, created Phocas and Felix; Racine, Nero and Narcissus. Voltaire has painted the effects of fanaticism with a frightful truth; and Ducis, whose taste was simple, and whose life was religious, painted, in Albufar, in traits of fire, all the transports of incestuous love.

These terminate my hasty reflexions on Lekain and our art. I have thrown them together without order; but I hope, in the quietude of silence and repose, to resume the subject, and give, for the use of my successors, the result of a long experience in a career devoted entirely to the advancement of the beautiful art I love so deeply.

REVIEW

MR. IRVING, in his preface to this remarkable essay, calls it a kind of vade-mecum of the actor's calling, written by one of themselves, and by an artist universally recognized as a competent expositor; "a permanent embodiment of the principles of our art." We may then start with every confidence that we have here a true explanation of the manner in which a great actor works. Let us listen to his words. "Every actor," says Talma, "ought to be his own tutor. If he has not in himself the necessary faculties for expressing the passions and painting characters, all the lessons in the world cannot give them to him. The faculty of creating is born with us; but if the actor possesses it the counsel of persons of taste may then guide him; and as there is in the art of reciting verse a part in some degree mechanical, the lessons of an actor profoundly versed in his art may save him much study and time." Here, we take it, is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth as to dra-

matic teaching. A man may be taught to speak and move well and suitably; then, if he has genius, he may in twenty years teach himself to act, and during the process he may be much helpt by the counsel of persons of taste. And how is he to know whether he has the necessary genius? Talma answers, "sensibility" and "intelligence" are the two faculties pre-eminently required, but under the general heading of sensibility he includes much. He puts almost contemptuously on one side "the faculty which an actor possesses of being moved himself and of affecting his being so far as to imprint on his features, and especially on his voice, that expression and those accents of sorrow which awake sympathy and extort tears." No doubt the actor must have this kind of sensibility; but to this extent sensibility is not rare. It may sometimes be recognized in amateurs acting for the first time; and we take it that no moderately successful actor, even on a second-rate provincial stage, ever wanted sensibility to this extent. Let us call it, for the purpose of future reference, sensibility in the first degree, and then pass to what Talma further requires and still

calls sensibility—namely, that imagination which enables the actor to look on the lives of historical personages, or the impassioned figures created by genius, which reveals to him as tho by magic their physiognomy, their heroic stature, their language, their habits, all the shades of their character, all the movements of their soul, and even their singularities. We begin to feel that sensibility in the second degree is more difficult of attainment, and here it is well to remark that Talma does not place this faculty under the heading of "intelligence." He does not tell the actor that he must understand his author. This insight which he so justly acquires is to be a matter of feeling. The revelation comes by magic, not logic. Fanny Kemble says, in perfect accord with Talma, perception rather than reflexion reaches the aim proposed. It is the absence of this sensibility in the second degree that makes many ordinary fairly good actors so insufferably bad in great parts. Probably they understand the words they speak, and have a vague notion of what the person they represent may be supposed to feel, but they have no insight into heroic thought or feeling;

and, says Talma, "if the actor is not endowed with a sensibility at least equal to that of any of his audience, he can move them but very little." Too often our actors have less of this sensibility than many of those who hear them. Why then, it may be asked, do not audience and actors change places? Because the sensitive hearers lack sensibility in the third degree—for Talma has not done with this word yet. He includes in this term "the faculty of exaltation which agitates an actor, takes possession of his senses, shakes even his very soul, and enables him to enter into the most tragic situations and the most terrible of the passions as if they were his own."

Now, not one of the audience, which condemn the second-rate actor in a great part because they have more sensibility than he has, will be found capable of the kind of exaltation here described. We think that here Talma has confused or blended two very different faculties under one name. To feel and to express were one to the great actor, but the vast majority of mankind is, we think, denied the gift of expressing emotion. And here it seems to us that Talma

misses the very point which distinguishes the actor from other artists. All artists must have this sensibility he demands, but the form which each naturally employs to express his emotion determines whether he shall be author, painter, musician or actor. Under the influence of this "exaltation" the actor finds the tone, the look, the gesture required to express the feeling with which he is inspired, and this gift is, to some extent, possest by all actors who can earn their bread. This is the faculty which is trained by stage practice. And here we may again refer for support to 'Notes on some of Shakspere's Plays,' by F. A. Kemble. Speaking with the authority of tradition in a great family she says, "There is a specific comprehension of effect and the means of producing it, which in some persons is a distinct capacity, and this forms what actors call the study of their profession." And altho Talma mixt up expression and feeling when endeavoring in a brief way to write an analytical account of his own art, he takes precisely this view of study. Here is his method. "The actor who possesses this double gift" [sensibility and intelli-

gence] "adopts a course of study peculiar to himself. In the first place, by repeated exercises he enters deeply into the emotions, and his speech acquires the accent proper to the situation of the personage he has to represent. This done, he goes to the theater not only to give theatrical effect to his studies, but also to yield himself to the spontaneous flashes of his sensibility and all the emotions which it voluntarily produces in him. What does he then do? In order that his inspirations may not be lost, his memory, in the silence of repose, recalls the accent of his voice, the expression of his features, his action—in a word, the spontaneous workings of his mind which he had supposed to have free course, and, in effect, everything which in the moments of his exaltation contributed to the effect he had produced. His intelligence thus passes all these means in review, connecting them and fixing them in his memory, to re-employ them at pleasure in succeeding representations." This passage expresses better than anything we have ever read what the actor's study really should be. After a certain amount of preparation, he yields in a state of exaltation to impulse; sug-

gestions crowd upon him; tones, cries, gestures, expressions, actions, are created. The exaltation is extreme, and these moments when he is alone, and the god works in him may be those of keenest pleasure. But this state is succeeded by a calm and critical mood, in which the true artist chooses, rejects, and groups the partial effects obtained so as to produce one great and consistent whole. In this work, he will be greatly aided if he has a sympathetic friend of sound judgment—Talma's "person of taste"—whose counsel he may take. Those who know what this study means are driven almost to distraction when they hear an actor—perhaps a great actor—complimented on being able to remember the words of his part. But, on the other hand, it must be almost as galling when a great actor is told that he really understands his author's meaning. One great charm in this essay by Talma lies in the total absence of this contemptible worship of the human understanding—a very good thing in its way, tho one of but small importance in mere art. To Talma intelligence meant a sound critical faculty, not logical, but perceptive, enabling

its possessor to keep what was good in art and reject that which was less good. We find in this essay a clear solution of the question continually askt, whether the actor really feels what he is acting. Talma, as we understand him, only felt the emotion once in its full intensity—that is to say, at the moment of creation during the solitary rehearsal. Subsequently the effect was produced by the aid of memory; but the body is so constituted that if by the aid of memory we perfectly reproduce a tone or cry, that tone or cry brings back simultaneously a close reproduction of the feeling by which it was first created. Thus to act a great part a man must be capable of real greatness. As Talma says: "He will never rise to excellence as an actor whose soul is not susceptible of the extremes of passion." And yet the representation night after night of these great feelings may come to be almost mechanical, or, rather, the feelings of the actor can be almost mechanically reawakened by the excellence of his own art. Thus in describing Lekain at his best period, when his art was ripe, he says: "Accent, inflexions, actions, attitudes, looks, all were reproduced at every

representation with the same exactness, the same vigor; and if there was any difference between one representation and another, it was always in favor of the last." Spontaneity is an admirable gift, but you cannot be spontaneous a second time. Spontaneous movements are right and necessary at the moment of creation, but are wholly out of place before an audience.

Talma liked good scenery and correct dresses, but one feels that if he were alive now, he might say, *Faut de la vertu, pas trop n'en faut.* His remarks on truth and nature are true and natural. He points out, taught by the scenes he had witnest during the Reign of Terror, that "the man of the world and the man of the people, so opposite in their language, frequently express the great agitations of the mind in the same way," and that "the great movements of the soul elevate man to an ideal nature in whatever rank fate may have placed him." While, however, he recommends the observation of passion in others, it is clear that he never condescended to mimicry. Some talent for mimicry is very common among actors, and is indeed a useful accomplishment, especially

in the lower walks of the profession; but no man can ever hope to play Coriolanus by mimicking some statesman.

Talma's chief observations were made upon himself. He attended to his own tones, his own fact, when in real grief; he is half ashamed and half proud of having done so. We imagine that all artists are alike on this point, and that in this fact lies a certain compensation for the exact keenness of their feelings. They suffer more than any other men, and get more good from suffering. Talma observed that an emotion truly exprest moved an audience which did not understand the words. Most people would attribute this to gesture; but he, rightly as we think, considered the effect as due to the voice, and as an instance he speaks of Miss O'Neil moving Frenchmen who did not understand her to tears. The point is a curious one, for we have observed that a foreigner can judge artistic truth in acting with fair success when he is wholly incapable of appreciating any little niceties of accent or elocution. Thus too we allow foreigners to act on our stage who cannot speak one word so as to be acceptable to our

ears in English. Yet their tones will bring tears almost as readily as if they spoke with English tongues. We believe that this admits of explanation; but the theory would demand too much space to be developed here. Let all those who are interested in acting read Talma's essay; and then, if they wish for a little amusement, they may turn to the 'Actor's Art,' by Mr. Gustave Garcia. Talma tells his readers what a great actor must learn, Mr. Garcia explains what small actors can be taught and do learn.

NOTES

NOTES

LEKAIN (1729-1778 was the foremost tragic actor of France in his generation as Talma was the foremost tragic actor of the succeeding generation. He owed to the friendly admiration of Voltaire his admission into the Comédie-Française when he was only twenty-one. He had against him certain physical disadvantages; and he had in his favor a rich, warm voice, which he cultivated assiduously until it became a supple instrument for rendering passion. At Voltaire's suggestion he was invited to Potsdam by Frederick the Great. To him and to Mlle. Clairon were due two important reforms in the French theater,—the striking advance in the propriety of costuming and the clearing of the stage of the Théâtre Français of the mob of courtiers who had until then been privileged to occupy seats in close proximity to the actors.

Talma (1763-1826) spent a part of his youth in England; and he made his first appearance at the Théâtre Français in 1787, when he was twenty-four. He excelled in the chief characters of French classicist tragedy; and he gave them an external verisimilitude by donning flowing white robes de-

signed for him by his friend David, the painter. During the French revolution he became intimate with Napoleon I, retaining this friendship even after the establishment of the Empire. When Napoleon went to meet the Czar at Erfurt in 1808 he took with him Talma and others of the Comédie-Française, telling him that they were to perform "before a parterre of Kings." He survived to behold the beginnings of the Romanticist revolt which was to overthrow the rigorous code of the Classicists, and both Victor Hugo and the elder Dumas have recorded the admiration they felt for his skill as an actor.

The autobiography of Lekain edited by his son first appeared in Paris in the year X. When the volume was included in 1825 in a series of dramatic memoirs, there was prefixt to it a paper entitled 'Reflexions on Lekain and on the Actor's Art,' by Talma. This essay revealed the fact that Talma had thought profoundly about the art which he brilliantly adorned; and that he was able to present his thoughts skilfully. The significance and the importance of what Talma had written was immediately recognized; and in all later French discussion of the principles and the practice of the histrionic art, the words of the great French tragedian were frequently cited.

At the suggestion of Sir Henry Irving, whose position at the head of the British stage was as undisputed as had been Talma's leadership in the French theater, the essay was translated by some person unknown and publisht in 1877 in a British monthly, the *Theater*. From this magazine the anonymous translation was reprinted as a pamphlet, entitled 'Talma on the Actor's Art,' which was issued in 1883, with a preface by Sir Henry Irving. This publication brought the paper to the attention of the English-speaking public for the first time; and its own merits and the eulogy bestowed upon it by Irving evoked a host of reviews in the British and American periodicals of the time.

As might be expected most of these ephemeral criticisms were valueless. One of them, however, that which appeared in the *Saturday Review,* was a solid contribution to the subject. It was written by a life-long student of the theory and practise of the art of acting,—Fleeming Jenkin, professor of engineering in the University of Edinburgh. He was a man of varied intellectual interests, —as must be well known to all those who may have read the memoir affectionately written by his former pupil, Robert Louis Stevenson. This brief biography was prepared as an introduction to the two volumes

in which the literary and scientific papers of Fleeming Jenkin were collected. These volumes were publisht in London in 1887 by Longmans, Green and Co.; and they replevined from the swift oblivion of the back-number two articles on the acting of Mrs. Siddons and this review of Talma's essay. It is by the kind permission of Mrs. Fleeming Jenkin and of Longmans, Green and Co. that this paper is here printed as a most useful commentary on both Talma and Irving.

The discussion of the principles and the practise of his art by an artist who can analize his instinctive and intuitive processes is always useful to all who seek to inquire into the secrets of the craft; but these analyses tend to the undue consideration of technic and they are vital only where the artist happens also to possess range as well as depth of vision. This double qualification is Talma's as obviously as it was also Samson's and Coquelin's. On the other hand Mrs. Siddons and Salvini, mighty as they were in the impersonation of great characters, were incompetent to analize these very parts; and Mrs. Siddons' essay on Lady Macbeth is as empty as Salvini's paper on Othello.

Talma has luminously indicated what an actor must do to make himself master of a part; and it is interesting to supplement this with the account of his own method of get-

ting inside the skin of a character which Coquelin once gave to an interviewer:—"When I have to create a part, I begin by reading the play with the greatest attention five or six times. First, I consider what position my character should occupy, on what plane in the picture I must put him. Then I study his psychology, knowing what he thinks, what he is morally. I deduce what he ought to be physically, what will be his carriage, his manner of speaking, his gesture. These characteristics once decided, I learn the part without thinking about it further; then, when I know it, I take up my man again and, closing my eyes, I say to him, 'Recite this for me.' Then I see him delivering the speech, the sentence I askt him for; he lives, he speaks, he gesticulates before me; and then I have only to imitate him."

B. M.

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